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A NOTE ON FRENCH-ENGLISH WORD PAIRS IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

"If too many foreign words are poured in, it looks as if they were designed, not to assist the natives, but to conquer them."—JOHN DRYDEN.

It is a commonly held opinion¹ that early Middle English writers used word pairs made up of a French and a native English word in order to make themselves clear to both their learned and their "lewed" readers. This opinion Jespersen² expresses in these words: "A greater assistance [in teaching the English population new words] may perhaps have been derived from a habit which may have been common in conversational speech, and which was at any rate not uncommon in writing, that of using a French word side by side with its native synonym, *the latter serving more or less openly as an interpretation of the former for the benefit of those who were not yet familiar with the more refined expression.*"

Objection to this interlinear theory is strongly expressed by Greenough and Kittredge³ upon the sensible grounds that every sort of synonym combination is so common in Middle English that the practice of using French-English word pairs must be regarded as a mere stylistic habit and that the frequency of hybrid double expressions is largely due to the accident of the "composite character of our vocabulary." Stylistic habit is, indeed, accepted by Jespersen to account for the large number of instances of French-English word pairs in Chaucer and later in Caxton. Jespersen believes, furthermore, that these writers used double expressions to "heighten or strengthen the effect of the style." It must be denied, however, that Chaucer's "*endyte and make a thing*" (*Canterbury Tales*, A 95) and Caxton's "I toke a *glasse* or a *mirroure*" (p. 83), for example, are either higher or stronger than the use of the single verb or noun would have been. Shall we deny the trick to Layamon and to the author of the *Ancren Riwe* and grant it to Chaucer and to Caxton upon the assumption that French was better known to the readers of these

¹ Among others: Behrens, "Beiträge zur Geschichte der französischen Sprache in England," *Französische Studien*, V, 2, pp. 8-9; Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, pp. 96-97; Bladin, *Studies on Denominative Verbs in English* (Upsala diss., 1911), p. 22.

² Jespersen, *loc. cit.*; the italics are mine.

³ *Words and Their Ways in English Speech*, p. 115.

later writers than it was to those of the earlier writers? If we suppose a smaller knowledge of French on the part of the reader of the *Ancren Riwe* than on the part of the reader of Caxton, we should not look for so many interlinear pairs in Caxton. But Caxton and later writers use them in remarkable measure. It is not quite fair to explain away Caxton's use by "mannerism" and at the same time to plead the special case of author's care for the ignorant reader to account for earlier instances of the same thing.

An added objection to Jespersen's view is the probability that early as well as late Middle English writers were touched with the author's vanity of desiring to display a knowledge of two languages. If the knowledge of French among the "lewed" was so small that it was necessary to gloss new words of French origin for them, acquaintance with such words surely would be looked at with admiration by the ignorant readers, and it was worth an author's while to exhibit his familiarity with new and exotic expressions.¹ If the writing was addressed to the learned, surely the learned could be expected to know the homely word, and the "more refined" expression was unnecessary. Layamon,² in the examples taken from the *Brut* by Behrens, tells us that he knows the equivalents of the English expressions in another language. In the example from the *Chronicle* (1137), cited in Behrens' collection, the writer merely observes that the French called *gæildes tenserie*.

The examples of French-English word pairs assembled in the Behrens-Jespersen collection are probable instances in early Middle English of a stylistic affectation which Shakespeare mocked in *Holofernes*: "The deer was, as you know, *sanguis*, in blood; ripe as the pomewater, who now hangeth like a jewel in the ear of *caelo*, the sky, the welkin, the heaven; and anon falleth like a crab on the face of *terra*, the soil, the land, the earth."³

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¹ The practice has not, of course, died. In thirty consecutive pages of the writing of a recent American author whose style is notorious for its uselessly foreign vocabulary I count just thirty foreign words and expressions, some of which are glossed; for example: "charlantry and *blague*"; "prosateur, prose artist."

² *twelfe iferan*
þe Freinsce heo cleopeden dusze pers (I, 1, 69).
to lokie in þan lufte
þe craft his ihote astronomie
in oþer kunnes speche (II, 2, 598).

³ *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV, 2, 3 ff. See E. W. Fay, *American Journal of Philology*, XXXII, 408.